

Controlled Breathing

an Antidote for Stress

Many stress management techniques have one thing in common: breathing. We all breathe in either regular and rhythmic or irregular and spasmodic ways, depending on our physical, mental, and emotional state. The way we breathe affects our thinking and feeling, our physical, and our mental behavior. It is well established, for example, that short, irregular, gasping breaths are associated with panic attacks and general anxiety. Also, irregular breathing and frequent sighing have been found to be associated with depression. Breathing may be heavy and shallow, or deeper and more rhythmic and regular. Controlled breathing helps regulate the heart and pulse rate as well as ease stress and tension.

You can practice the controlled breathing technique below by either sitting upright in a chair or lying down, supported by cushions under your neck, back, and legs. Initially, it is recommended that you practice this technique for 5 to 10 minutes, 3 to 4 times a day. As you become more comfortable with this technique it will become more natural and you will find that you can use it with little concentrated effort. It is helpful to record how you felt physically and emotionally before, during, and after practicing the controlled breathing method of stress management. Breathing awareness is an essential first step in attaining balanced breathing.

- Step 1** Sit straight in a chair with your feet flat on the floor and your hands in your lap.
- Step 2** Relax your muscles, beginning with your feet and progressing to your face. Keep them relaxed.
- Step 3** Inhale through your nose and feel your stomach expand. Focus on the feeling of air entering and leaving your nostrils. Rhythmically breathe in and out, slowly and regularly, with each breath lasting about the same length of time (count to four) and depth. Pause briefly between inhaling and exhaling. The pause should be almost unobservable but enough for you to observe it and to notice the moment between the two breaths as the point of perfect balance. Continue this process for at least five minutes.
- Step 4** Focus your thoughts on your breathing.
- Step 5** When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes.

Do not worry whether you are successful in achieving a deep level of relaxation. Maintain a passive attitude and let relaxation happen at its own pace. When distracting thoughts occur, acknowledge the thoughts, then release them, and concentrate on your counting.

Decide where, when, and how you will practice this technique. Keep a record of your practice periods and the benefits you experience in practicing controlled breathing. Set regular review periods to check on the effectiveness of this stress management technique and learn how it can be linked to other ways in which you may better manage the stress in your life.

Adapted from Benson, H. (2000). The Relaxation Response. HarperTorch: New York, NY.

